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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000254

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: MUTINY INVESTIGATIONS CONTINUE, FBI ARRIVES,  
POLITICIANS RETURN TO PARTISANSHIP

REF: A. DHAKA 241  
[1](#)B. DHAKA 222  
[1](#)C. DHAKA 218  
[1](#)D. DHAKA 213  
[1](#)E. DHAKA 210  
[1](#)F. DHAKA 207  
[1](#)G. DHAKA 204

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty, reasons 1.4 (b&d)

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) Investigations into the February 25-26 mutiny in the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) continue, and though no credible evidence of an external conspiracy has yet surfaced, allegations persist, fostered in part by Bangladesh's top leaders. A two-person FBI team from Embassy New Delhi arrived to consult with Government of Bangladesh (GOB) investigators amid intense media scrutiny. Former Chief of Army Staff and President H.M. Ershad told the Ambassador that the Army was aware of unrest within the BDR in the days before the mutiny and that lives could have been saved if Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had called in the Army as soon as the mutiny started. Ershad, however, backed off earlier suggestions that the Government of India (GOI) might have been behind the mutiny. BNP Member of Parliament Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, who Indian media reported instigated the mutiny, told us privately that Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia no longer planned to work with the GOB on a response to the mutiny as the Awami League Government had rebuffed her attempts to reach out.

NO CONCLUSIONS YET FROM THREE INVESTIGATIONS  
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[1](#)2. (C) Twelve days after the border guard mutiny that left as many as 74 dead, three separate ongoing investigations/inquiries have yet to offer any conclusions. The government-appointed commission headed by retired civil servant Anissuzzaman Khan asked March 8 for an additional two weeks to report (it was originally tasked to present its findings March 9), while the separate police and army investigations continue. Public speculation (including by the Prime Minister herself) persists in focusing on an external conspiracy. To date, no credible evidence in support of those theories has emerged.

FBI TEAM ARRIVES IN DHAKA  
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13. (C) Responding to the GOB request for assistance, a two-person Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) team from Embassy New Delhi arrived in Dhaka March 8. The team will meet with GOB investigators to gain an initial assessment of the situation. We expect an advisory team from New Scotland Yard to arrive as early as Wednesday to join the investigative effort. The media has cast the FBI's presence here in a very positive light, noting USG support of Bangladesh, etc.

SECOND-GUESSING THE PRIME MINISTER'S RESPONSE TO THE MUTINY  
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14. (C) Leading figures in Bangladesh continue to second-guess the Prime Minister's actions in the early hours of the mutiny. Former Chief of Army Staff and President H.M. Ershad told the Ambassador March 9 that if the Prime Minister had called in the Army the morning of February 25, shortly after the mutiny started, the mutineers would have dropped their arms and far fewer people would have died. Ershad, who leads Bangladesh's third largest political party, the Jatiya Party, said the mere presence of the Army in the crucial early hours of the mutiny would have been enough to defuse the situation.

15. (C) Ershad also offered the only concrete evidence we have seen thus far that at least some Army officers knew of the potential for unrest within the BDR. Ershad read to the Ambassador a text message written by Ershad's nephew, an Army colonel serving as BDR sector commander in Dinajpur, who perished in the mutiny. Ershad's nephew sent the text

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message to the four battalion commanders in his sector on February 21, almost a week before the mutiny. In his message, Ershad's nephew urged the battalion commanders to "be vigilant," as "subversive activities" were taking place in the BDR that could result in trouble during BDR Week. (NOTE: The mutiny occurred during BDR Week, when almost all BDR commanding officers seconded from the Army were gathered in Dhaka. END NOTE.)

16. (C) One dog, however, did not bark during Ershad's conversation with the Ambassador. The former President studiously avoided pointing the finger of blame at any external forces. This was in marked contrast to his phone conversation with the Ambassador on February 28, when Ershad strongly implied that India had somehow been behind the mutiny. Indeed, on March 9, Ershad specifically acknowledged that it would not make sense for the GOI to have instigated the mutiny.

WAR OF WORDS AND PERSONNEL CHANGES CONTINUE  
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17. (C) The acrimonious war of words between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) continues. In its latest iteration, the Prime Minister challenged BNP Chairperson and Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia to "share evidence" of a conspiracy. Zia responded with a public statement March 8 denying she held any evidence and declaring that the onus was on the government to find out the truth behind the mutiny. Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, a close Zia adviser and member of Parliament, confided to EmbOff March 9 that Begum Zia no longer intended to work with the GOB on a response to the mutiny, since the GOB had rebuffed BNP advances.

18. (C) Chowdhury, who has announced he will sue CNN's India affiliate for reporting his alleged involvement in the mutiny, said Army anger at the GOB response to the mutiny had led to greater Army support for the BNP, particularly at the rank of Major and below. Chowdhury opined that the mutiny had significantly weakened the Awami League government, which was not acting like a party with 260 of the 300 seats in

Parliament, i.e. in a way that showed the leadership needed during a crisis.

¶9. (C) As investigations and verbal sparring continue, so too do changes in assignment of government officials. March 8 saw a series of GOB personnel changes, including the replacement of Home Secretary Abdul Karim (a Caretaker Government appointee and excellent Embassy contact) by Awami League loyalist Abdus Sobhan Sikdar. This follows recent changes in Army personnel, including the appointment of a new director general (DG) for the Ansars (an auxiliary civilian force), a new DG for the BDR and a new Director for Military Intelligence. Tanjim Ahmed Sohel Taj, the State Minister for Home Affairs, who was reportedly sharply criticized by the Prime Minister for remaining abroad as the mutiny unfolded, has now returned to Dhaka, but has not yet been seen in public. Meanwhile, speculation continues over whether the PM will replace the Home Minister herself over the latter's handling of the mutiny (as called for by opposition leader Khaleda Zia and others).

GOB BLOCKS YOU TUBE SITE  
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¶10. (SBU) Meanwhile, the government blocked the video-sharing website You Tube on March 9 for hosting audio of the emotional meeting between the Prime Minister and army officers March 1 (Ref A). Media quoted a senior government official stating that the blockage was temporary and would be lifted "soon."

OPERATION REBEL HUNT: STILL UNDERWAY  
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¶11. (SBU) There has been no definitive official announcement of the numbers of dead and missing, but media reports said March 8 that at least 74 people died in the mutiny, including some 56 army officers killed by the mutineers. Operation Rebel Hunt, a joint army and law enforcement manhunt operation, continues in a low key manner, with periodic media

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claims of new arrests. According to media reports on March 8, some 250 BDR personnel are "still on the run," following the return to BDR headquarters of some 6,500 who initially fled following the mutiny.

COMMENT  
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¶12. (C) Tempers have cooled somewhat. Ershad is extremely plugged-in with the serving military. His backing away from his earlier suggestions that the GOI was behind the mutiny might reflect a growing recognition among some officers that perhaps there was no external hand behind the mutiny. Still, tension remains. The Awami League government continues to put loyalists in key positions, and all hopes of politicians rising above partisanship in the wake of this national tragedy have vanished. We continue to urge transparency and moderation in the GOB response to the mutiny; expert technical assistance like that the FBI, or other USG representatives, can provide will help reinforce this message.

MORIARTY